OUR VIEW

By the Tribune Editorial Board

Cedar Valley water

Plan to save aquifer

Big cracks are forming in the floor of Cedar Valley. They've already undermined one unfinished subdivision north of Enoch, and they're still growing. One is 2.4 miles long. If unchecked, they could threaten Enoch itself, not to mention local roads and buried utility lines.

This is not a Halloween story, or the movie "Tremors." It's scarier, in fact, because it's real. Fortunately, the Utah Geological Survey knows what the cause is, and if the people who pump water from the many wells in the area can cooperate, the problem is fixable. But a solution will require both community spirit and self-sacrifice, because people will have to use less water.

Since 1939, according to the UGS report, more water has been taken from the aquifer below Cedar Valley than Mother Nature has funneled back in. The water table has dropped by as much as 114 feet. This has caused the underground sediments in the aquifer to compact. The fissures and sinkholes visible on the surface of the ground are evidence of subsidence, that is, ground settling. The ground has sunk by as much as four feet over a broad area of Cedar Valley.

This settling has caused about 4 miles of cracks or fissures in the ground, particularly in the area of Enoch (north of Cedar City) and around Quichapa Lake. There may be other fissures that are not yet visible.

If people continue to withdraw more water from the aquifer through the numerous municipal and agricultural wells in the area than the natural ecosystem is able to recharge, the ground settling will get worse. This so-called ground water mining has caused havoc in other areas of the Southwest, notably in the Phoenix and Tucson areas and in Las Vegas. Freeways, homes, sewers and rail lines have sunk into the ground, causing tens of millions of dollars in damages.

Perhaps as important, the water supply itself can be damaged. As the ground water is pumped out and used up, surface water carrying contamination can infiltrate through cracks in the ground. The UGS report says there already is a threat of that in Cedar Valley from surface water that carries animal waste flowing near a fissure.

Water is life in the arid West, and no community can afford to put it at risk from overuse. Communities and farmers in Cedar Valley rely on the aquifer below for their livelihoods and their drinking water.

The only way to reverse the damage is to reduce withdrawals from the wells until that quantity reaches equilibrium with what nature recharges. Now it's up to water managers to devise a plan to achieve that.